

COMMUNICATING WITH YOUR DOCTOR

A Resource for Veterans, Service Members, and Their Families

A primary care doctor can help put together all of your health information, make recommendations that are in your best interest and guide you in making decisions about your own healthcare. It is important to **participate in your own care** as a partner with your primary care doctor and all of your healthcare providers. One of the first steps to doing so is to ensure you understand everything that has been done or is planned whenever you call or visit your doctor. Here are some things you can do to **improve communication with your doctor**.

Before your visit:

- Write down your symptoms, concerns and questions, so that you don't forget to mention them. If need be, make notes on what seems to cause or trigger a symptom, when they are better or worse and when they seem to occur.
- Think about what questions or concerns are most important for you to address in this visit. You may only have time to address two or three concerns so make sure you prioritize them before your visit/call.
- Make notes for yourself of the questions you want to ask the doctor – include questions about any information you have learned from sources other than him or her.
- If need be, talk to friends or relatives about the issues you should address. You may consider asking someone to come with you to help take notes and remember questions you had.
- Bring all of your medications or a list of medications (both prescription and non-prescription) with you to your appointment. Any medication that you're taking, including medication prescribed by another doctor, should be included.
- Describe your symptoms or reasons for your primary concerns – this will help the doctor to focus his/her evaluation. Tell your doctor what you think is happening and why. Tell your doctor what steps you have taken so far to relieve the problem.
- Let your doctor know what other health care providers (primary care provider, specialists, chiropractor, etc.) have told you about your condition, prescribed to you, what tests they have performed, and ask if they want to talk with those doctors about the results. If possible, bring copies of any test results with you or make sure they were forwarded to your primary care doctor.
- Ask plenty of questions and make sure you understand the answers. Take notes during your visit. It may be useful to repeat back to your doctor what was said to make sure you have understood and that your notes are accurate. If it is a help to you, ask the doctor to write down information, especially medications or test names. You are entitled to have the doctor do this for you.
- Discuss with your doctor the different ways of handling your health problems. Sometimes there is more than one treatment or test option. Be sure you understand the pros and cons of each option so you can let your doctor know how you weigh them. It's also important to discuss what would happen if nothing is done.
- Ask your doctor where you can find additional information on your particular condition.
- Make sure you summarize the agreed to next steps including when you next need to follow up or see your doctor.

At your visit:

- Let your doctor know you have a plan for the visit.
- At the very beginning of your appointment, tell your doctor the concerns you want to address at the visit and what areas you want to focus on. Listen to what your doctor would like to discuss and agree together on what you will cover. Remember that the doctor has a very small amount of time to meet with you and you may need to schedule more than one visit.

After your visit:

Try the agreed-upon treatment or tests. If your condition changes or a treatment is not working, inform your doctor as soon as possible and tell him/her why you think it's not working.

Additional Resources

Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality

http://www.ahrq.gov/questionsaretheanswer/level3col_1.asp?nav=3colNav02&content=02_0_talk

American Academy of Orthopedic Surgeons

<http://orthoinfo.aaos.org/topic.cfm?topic=A00091>

American Heart Association

<http://www.americanheart.org/presenter.jhtml?identifier=113>

Harvard Medical School

<http://www.health.harvard.edu/fhg/doctor/doctor.shtml>

National Institute on Aging

<http://nihseniorhealth.gov/talkingwithyourdoctor/toc.html>